

The Wolves In the Walls by MrsEvadneCake

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Devil's Night 79

"If he had already been King Steve, first of his name, crowned at age fifteen, with his carefully cultivated but difficult to maintain position of *Always the Coolest of Dudes Under Any and All Circumstances* he might have been able to convince himself that he hadn't seen what he had seen and opened the door and maybe not made it to sixteen. If he had already been eighteen year-old Steve he would have been squeezing out of the bathroom window and running hell-for-leather to his car to get the nail-studded bat he keeps strapped in the trunk because he knows for a *fact* that there are monsters and also knows what to do about it.

As it is, Steve Harrington- aged thirteen-trusts his instincts. He keeps the light on, the door locked, and spends the night in the bathtub."

The Wolves In the Walls

I stood stone-like at midnight
Suspended in my masquerade
I combed my hair till it was just right
And commanded the night brigade.
-Growin' Up, Bruce Springsteen

Devil's Night '79

Steve Harrington is thirteen. He's already a daredevil, already a ringmaster- if an infant one. He has shins that ache with sudden extra inches and a voice that occasionally peppers conversation with warbles of crackling, high octave betrayal. He's old and wise and has smoked behind Wesselman's without coughing. He has gotten older boys to buy beer for him and found a stack of dog-eared Playboys in the north woods and he's pretty sure the female body holds no more mysteries after that. He doesn't walk with friends as much as he leads small parades and is the object of a dozen prepubescent crushes that don't know yet what they would do with him if they got him. Odds are good that he will be the one to find out if Becky really filled out over the summer or if she pads her bra.

But also.

Steve Harrington is thirteen, hiding under his quilt, and he knows with the inexplicable clarity specific to young children that there is a monster in his room..

But because Steve Harrington is generally cannonballing into mostly-unsupervised adulthood like the 6 ft end of the swimming pool he also knows with the logical certainty of an unflappable, cool, grown-up that there's no such thing as monsters.

So he tells himself that. Tells himself over and over. Tells himself, silently, in his head because even though there's no such thing as monsters that stupid kid part of himself that currently has his toes curled and limbs paralyzed and heart pounding and voice frozen like a solid thing in his throat knows that if he makes a noise the monster that doesn't exist, the monster that isn't in his room and isn't under

his bed or in the shadows behind the door is going to *fucking kill him*.

Mom...Daaad.

They're not there to yell for, of course. Just the latchkey under the mat and the note that says home soon and the seven bucks for a pizza.

Did something move? Nothing moved. Stop being a stupid baby, Steve. Jesus.

There are other things besides monsters, a traitorous voice supplies. Real things. They never caught the guy who killed that family out in Wichita- except that's two states away and that's a long way to go to kill people when there are still plenty of people in Kansas, even if you have a car. But Carol swears her cousin's sister's roommate's friend up at Butler had been babysitting and some guy had started calling the house and kept asking where the children were and...

The dark suddenly seems darker, more solid, like it's leaking out from under the bed and behind the dresser and creeping from under the bare branches outside of his bedroom window, spreading like ink out of a broken pen bleeding through notebook paper. The glow of the bathroom light he forgot to turn off looks like it's struggling with it. Looks like it's *losing*.

It's the DOE lab, dad says after the third blackout in a month and the third fuse reset. *It's fucking up the whole power grid*. Steve knows about girls and all manner of adult mysteries but he doesn't know how to change a fuse (*and the fuse box is in the basement and if monsters are a concern in his room, where everything is warm and safe and he has his sports equipment and his action figures and his poster of Cheryl Tiegs in a pink bikini- there's no way he'll survive a trip into the basement*) and dad forgot to leave instructions for if it blows...

It flickers. A longer flicker than before. Long enough that he thinks that it's off for good and his heart nearly stops. But it does come back and with it-

It's...a shadow on the wall. Hunched and weird. It's...

It's a baseball bat. A bunch of clothes. A hockey stick. His wolf mask from his Halloween costume. A messy pile of Steve Harrington's life, turned against him in the dark and by his imagination. He considers reaching a skinny arm out from the covers- thinks he can do it fast like a snake, twist the little knob on the bedside lamp and banish the stupid fake monster for good.

Don't.

In the dark there might be a monster or there might be a hockey stick. In the light he'll know for sure.

He turns onto his side. Slow. Painfully slow, each movement fractional and measured to not attract anything's attention. Easy does it, like the time when he was ten and Ms. Cambers' vicious asshole dog got out from her yard right in front of him and a couple of other kids walking home from school. It had snarled and snapped and growled a deep throated growl that had sent primal fear down his spine and all he wanted to do was run, because while Steve Harrington, even at ten, wasn't one to admit to fears Ms. Cambers' half-wolf-half-monster staring at him like breakfast had skyrocketed 'man-eating dogs' to the number one spot and cemented it there.

But then the big-eyed, brown haired little girl behind him had whimpered and that had decided that he was gonna get eaten by Mrs. Cambers dog before he let it get anyone else and it had felt like an eternity as he oh-so-slowly bent to pick up a broken piece of Cambers's picket fence to try to run it off. He had ended up with forty stitches, a crescent moon scar on his calf, a furious, frightened scolding from his mother.

There's nothing close enough to grab now though. Not his bat or his stick or...

Because the monster *is* your baseball bat, dipshit. Because it *is* your hockey stick. You're going to feel *so stupid*...

His back is to it now, long legs bent, feet pressed so hard into his mattress that the springs dig into his heels, hand planted on the edge with his fingers curled, ready to push off in...

Three...

The inky darkness of the bedroom seems to inhale.

Two...

Like it noticed him.

One!

It's less a jump than a launch. He lands three-pointed, feet and one splayed hand catching him on the hardwood as he explodes into a scrambling run through the blackness of the bedroom (and he's sure, *so sure*, that he feels air move behind his head- swing and a miss) through the door and into the dim hallway, too-big feet pounding the ground- a blaze of a boy, all elbows and ankles with blood rushing in his ears. If there's a second set of steps matching his he can't hear them over his panic and he doesn't stop to try.

Because the bathroom light is on and the bathroom has a *lock*.

His hand catches the door frame and he swings himself inside in one movement. Shuts it tight and twists the lock on the knob and tosses himself panting against the sink as the vanity light flickers waiting for...

Noise? No noise. Nothing? Nothing.

There's nothing. No monsters trying to break the door down. No prowling murderer footsteps up and down the hall. Just the usual silent, normal, nothing, of an empty house.

He white-knuckles the sink. Breathes deep.

The vanity mirror shows him a grin, or a grimace, lips pulled back to show his dog teeth, expression hovering somewhere between embarrassment and relief.

"Dumbass." The teenager says savagely to the scared little kid in the mirror as he plants a knee on the sink, hauling himself up onto the vanity to tighten the flickering bulb in it's socket. The glow goes steady as the circuit completes properly. "*Total* dumbass."

Shit, maybe he shouldn't have snuck into *Halloween* at the Hawk, even if it meant not seeing PJ Sole's tits. He hadn't been scared at the time- hell, he'd made fun of Tommy for being a chicken-shit about it. But if Tommy could see him now he'd die laughing because no amount of snuck beers or cigarettes or rumors that he had made it with a high school girl once (She, uh, lived in another town, though, so no one knew her) on the couch in his almost always parent-less house would be enough to recover from getting scared enough to almost piss his boxers because of a pile of laundry and a shot lightbulb.

He sits on the edge of the tub and the cold porcelain feels good and even though he's proven that he was just giving himself a nice pre-Halloween scare (Boo! No treat, Steve, just trick) the light feels good too, ugly and white and above all bright on the bathroom tile as he runs a hand through his hair -hair which dad says is getting so long that he's starting to look like a girl or worse, a *hippy*, which is pretty much all the mild parental disapproval he needs to confirm that he looks cool.

The smart move is to go back to sleep. Tomorrow is Halloween and he sure as hell isn't going to be the one yawning and turning in early with eggs left in his backpack while Tommy and Reed and Becky and Carol go on without him. He's not gonna let them be the ones to howl in midnight, arcing TP into tree branches. And he's definitely not going to let Reed be the first one to put his hand under Becky's shirt by default

If he'd rather trick or treat...well, that's stupid. Kid stuff. Like being scared by monsters. Sure, he doesn't know quite how talk of egging the Coach's car turned into hunting down Spooky Johnny Byers except that the reaction had been enthusiastic and unstoppable-unstoppable like an undertow that takes you out to sea- and by the time he has a chance to veto it it's already been enshrined as The Plan and he can't suggest another without raising suspicions that he's a loser-sympathizer

(Steven -Not Yet Steve- Harrington is seven years old and a younger boy dressed as Max from Where the Wild Things Are is staring into his face with an intense stranger's concern. Because Steven- Not Yet Steve- is sitting on the curb and he is crying- because he has pillaged Hawkins dry

of candy but has wandered far from home in the process and now he's a small, gangling lost boy whose friends all disappeared when the clock struck nine and left him in unfamiliar surroundings.

The boy asks him where his mom is.

He doesn't know. A party, he thinks. He asks the boy where he got his costume, tries to be casual, pretend he wasn't ever crying at all.

The boy's mom made it for him-from scratch, the boy says, looking proud.

He thinks that's really cool, because he's a cowboy even though he wanted to be Super Man, because a cowboy is just blue jeans and his dad's hat and no one took him to the costume shop.

The boy says his name is Jonathan and asks him when he has to be home.

He says he doesn't, particularly.

Jonathan smiles and thinks that's cool too.

But regardless of if being unsupervised is cool or not Jonathan also directs his mother's attention to the crisis, and the least mother-like mother he's ever seen- a tiny bird-like woman in a Led Zeppelin T-shirt with a even smaller kid in tow- kneels beside him and asks immediately what the matter is and smooths his hair and thumbs his tears away and becomes in an instant the most mother-like-like mother he's ever seen.

'Want to come with us?'" Jonathan asks cautiously as the younger boy starts to rummage in his brother's candy bag. "Maybe we can find your house? Do you like Goo-Goo Clusters?"

When he says yes Jonathan shoos his younger brother back to his mom and hands him one from his bag and his bird-like mother says that they still have trick-or-treating to do -even though they were obviously heading home- and to shout out when he sees something-anything- familiar before they take his hand and lead him toward home.)

What had happened with Byers last year hadn't really been his fault. Sure he'd thrown the first egg, but he hadn't really wanted to- Tommy had just said he wouldn't- had said that he couldn't hit Byers if he was trying. And, yeah, he'd laughed-of course he'd laughed-

when Tommy had thrown a ball of wet leaves at the little weirdo that had made him actually start to cry. They all laughed, because, c'mon, what a pussy.

Tommy told him later that night, flush with Byers' stolen candy and an expression like a cat proud of leaving a mouse in your shoe that there was a sizable rock tucked in with the leaves that had hit Jonathan Byers in the head. Says it doesn't matter though, they all know Byers is a pussy anyway, right?

When he doesn't answer right away and the other boy bristles defensively Steve Harrington feels the tide turning against him and a mutiny on the horizon and agrees that yeah, it doesn't matter, Byers is a pussy.

Told himself that puberty spins her wheel and some win and some lose and Byers lost and well, it's nature after that, isn't it? Survival of the fittest. Once the hierarchy sorts itself out you find out if you're capable of doing things you never thought you would do to make sure you stay with the pack- make sure you lead it.

'Cause if you don't get a taste for blood?

You get eaten.

Eaten.

There's something outside the door.

He knows it in spite of himself. The why of it doesn't register until after the feeling already freezes him in place.

When he was five he had tried swinging from the towel rack and took the whole thing off of it's upper hinge. His dad had fixed it- and while his dad was good a great many things (Timing the market, golf, fucking his secretaries) a carpenter he was not and it had never hung quite straight after that day. There was a tiny slice of gap between the door and the floor. A gap he needs to shove towels into when he sneaks a cigarette out the bathroom window when his parents are home. A slice of gap that the flickering light escapes through into the dark hall...usually. But not right now.

Like something is blocking it. Like something is standing there.

[h e l l o]

“*Holyshit!*” Steve Harrington startles so hard he falls backward into the tub, feet in the air, hands scrambling against the slippery porcelain as he tries to right himself in a flailing panic.

With the next flicker the shadow is gone and the lights go steady and if he had already been King Steve, first of his name, crowned at age fifteen, with his carefully cultivated but difficult to maintain position of *Always the Coolest of Dudes Under Any and All Circumstances*, he might have been able to convince himself that he hadn’t seen what he had seen and opened the door and maybe not made it to sixteen. If he had already been eighteen year-old Steve he would have been squeezing out of the bathroom window and running hell for leather to his car to get the nail-studded bat he keeps strapped in his trunk because he knows for a *fact* that there are monsters and also knows what to do about it.

As it is, Steve Harrington, aged thirteen, trusts his instincts. He keeps the light on, the door locked, and spends the night in the bathtub.

Halloween, ‘79

Hawkins is and always has been a town of incomplete savagery and incomplete civilization. There’s not so much forest that it can hide the town and not so much town that it’s ever possible to be far from loamy, earthy smell of forest. Any short-cut sends you through branches, over streams, through strips of dark wild-land that seem to sneak and snake their way behind houses and playgrounds and funnel back to the north woods like reminders that there was a time without Hawkins and there might be again someday. Adults studiously ignore them, teenagers skirt around their edges, drinking beers, scattering empties into the dead leaves, carving their names into wood and stone and making desperate attempts to feel each other up while pretending that they’re making no attempt at all.

It’s only the children that treat the woods like deep-sea divers treat the ocean.

Steve would rather be one of the ones on the edges, carving his name (SH, SH. I was here, I was here. Remember me, Hawkins) and trying without trying with Becky while Tommy and Carol messily suck face. He'd rather be doing pretty much anything besides chasing Jonathan Byers deeper and deeper into the North Woods with the others, flinging toilet paper and spraying silly string into the branches as they go.

He tells himself it's 'cause he's exhausted. Running on empty from spending the night curled up in the tub like an idiot waiting for a monster to break the door down instead of sleeping. Of course, once the sun came out he realized that he hadn't seen anything after all 'cause there's no such thing as monsters and he believes that completely and it has nothing to do with why he's decided to convince Tommy to let him crash on his basement couch until his parents come home.

That's the reason he wants to turn around and run back the other way, to the Devil's Chair or the Ravine, so he can kick back, take a break.

He tells himself it's not because he saw the look on Byers' face when they found him after school. The tired resignation as he had slung his back-pack up onto both shoulders and taken off running without a word.

Like they were...

Well. *Monsters*.

He's separated from the others. He can still hear them shouting shit at each other but they've spread out. His werewolf mask tunnels his vision, smells of Halloween store rubber and his own damp dog-breath and sweat so he tugs it off, rubbery wolf-grin stretching wider in his hands. It would be easy to head back to the quarry- Tommy's older brother and Bobby Bracowitz are probably there, flinging empties three hundred feet into the water. Figures it'll only take a couple more minutes before the rest of them are as bored with this as he is when they don't find-

A stick falls on the path in front of him. He follows its trajectory back

up- startles and drops his mask in surprise 'cause Byers is looking down at him from the crook of the tree branch above him, pale and serious.

Of course.

He had never been friends with Byers. Not *really*. If he had hung out with him every once in awhile when he was little, well that's just what kids *did* in Hawkins and back then the year gap between them hadn't felt like much. It wasn't until you got to ten that it became insurmountably vast.

He just hadn't understood the social hierarchy- the stone cold fact that you could never be cool and be friends with someone like Jonathan Byers. He hadn't understood what his mother meant when she said the family was a disgrace (which he now understands means dirt fucking poor and that Mrs. Byers got knocked up in High School) and he hadn't understood why his father had told him to stay away from the Byers boy because he *'seems 'a bit too fond of his mother'* (which he now understands means his dad thinks he's a queer). And he hadn't understood then why he was so much better off not climbing trees and trading comics and and learning to catch frogs in the creek with Jonathan Byers.

He has eggs and Silly String in his bag and Byers wouldn't stand a chance. He could call the others over- could see their eyes light up because of him and they'll have a story to tell Becky, 'cause she thinks Byers is creepy. He'll be her hero and that will settle the over-the-shirt-or-under the shirt debate, once and for all.

He could definitely do that.

He raises a tentative hand.

"Hi."

A long suspicious stare is the only answer. Well, he sure hasn't gotten any chattier. Fine then-

"...Hi."

It's barely a whisper, cautious, uncertain.

It's two little boys in bed-sheet superman capes, playing in McCarren creek until the sun goes down and going home burnt red and soaked, climbing to the top of the Old Sanders Oak and scarring the bark with their initials.

The sound of the others is suddenly close- leaves crunching and scattering under-foot, deadfall breaking like bones.

“Shit! Hide.”

Byers, suspicious but lacking much choice, presses himself as far down as he can.

“Anything, Steve?” The call comes from his left, and he spots Tommy plowing through the trees, humming Michael Myers’ theme music as he chases a gleefully screaming Carol then hears her genuine shriek as Reed jumps out from behind a tree trunk with a guttural roar.

He averts his gaze from the tree before the others can follow it to Byers as they barrel into the clearing together and tries to look casual.

“Nope. He probably ran home. They live out here.” He tosses an arm around Reed’s shoulders without a backward glance, steering him away, “C’mon, this shit is stupid anyway. Who cares about Byers?”

Tommy doesn’t follow them though because there’s something behind them catching his eye. *Shit*. He’s definitely seen Jonathan. They’ll know he was covering for the little dickhead and...

“Hey, Harrington, you left your mask.”

Tommy jogs back, scoops it up out of the leaves and examines it for a moment before he pulls it on to test it out, throwing his head back to give an exaggerated howl before grabbing Carol around the waist and lifting her off the ground.

“The better to eat you with!”

“Will you two cool it for like, two seconds. *Jesus*.” He tries to sound put-out about how immature they are about each other instead of jealous because rumors aside he hasn’t even made it to third base yet and the *two of them can never know that*. Tommy tugs the mask back

off, snickering a horsey snicker.

"Hey, don't you want it back?" Tommy holds the wolf head up to him like a floppy latex hunting trophy.

There's a creak of a branch- quiet but oh man, so fucking loud somehow behind him.

"Nah, it fucking sucks." He says quickly, pushing it back against Tommy's chest and using the momentum to start them moving out of the clearing. The other boy shrugs, tugging it back on, telegraphing a smug *your loss* through the latex, "C'mon, let's go see if Dan is at the quarry."

He doesn't think about Byers as he leads the pack of them away. Doesn't think about Byers or monsters or too much of anything for a long while.

But not forever.